

INGRID D. ROWLAND

POETRY AND PROPHECY  
IN THE ENCYCLOPEDIC SYSTEM  
OF ATHANASIUS KIRCHER

SUMMARY

The scholarly career of the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) combined Egyptology and natural philosophy into a single encyclopedic system. Explaining that system to a vast public through his Museum on the grounds of the Jesuits' Collegio Romano and through his voluminous publications constituted his own highly distinctive version of the Jesuit mission to «comfort souls» with the prospect of Christian salvation. Gifted himself with prophetic vision, Kircher nonetheless saw such phenomena as essentially rational expressions of divine and natural law, just as he regarded his scholarly work as its own variety of poetry, inspired by the Muses.

Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.  
And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.  
And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

LUKE 16: 29-31

**A**MONG the myriad skills professed by the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), the composition of poetry is conspicuous for its absence. He promised the readers of his many books that with the help of his ingenious inventions, they could learn to paint like the Old Masters, compose melodies with a musician's skill, draw a map as accurately as a professional surveyor, learn Egyptian hieroglyphs «perfectly» or express philosophy entirely in symbols, but he never created a comparable mechanical means to transform prose into verse.

This absence may reflect a real lack in Kircher's otherwise boundless repertory of talents, but it also reflected his belief that poetry was divinely inspired, and could not be created satisfactorily by mechanical means. As he often observed, the ancient authors of Greece and Rome treated poetry as a form of prophecy. The oracular god of Delphi, Apollo Loxias, gave reponses in verse, and throughout

the Greek world, from Syracuse in Sicily to Didyma in Asia Minor, Apollo governed both prophecy and the Nine Muses. When Plato's *Phaedrus* describes poetry as one of four different types of divine madness (*mania*): prophecy, poetry, religious initiation, and love, his otherwise boldly original dialogue only reaffirms the traditional association of prophecy with Apollo and poetry with the Muses. In their turn, Romans like the 'Platonic poet', Vergil, reinforced the ancient Greek association of poetry with prophecy. Indeed, the *Aeneid's* gripping picture of the Cumaean Sibyl's oracular frenzy in Book VI provided a catch-phrase for prophetic possession in subsequent ages: *numine afflata*. Kircher would cite the line repeatedly in his own work.

In the Bible, the other mainstay of Kircher's Jesuit culture, poetry, prophecy, and ecstatic possession also occurred together, in the poet-king David, who danced ecstatically before the Ark of the Covenant, in the Psalms, and in the Bible's prophetic books, themselves written in Hebrew verse (and translated with a poetic feel by St. Jerome for the Vulgate text). Kircher's faith in the truth of the Bible compelled him to accept prophets and their predictions as direct messages from an omniscient and omnipotent God. He also experienced divine possession himself. Throughout his long career, Kircher regularly presented his own mental processes as instances of divine enthusiasm: as cataleptic ecstasies, or mental storms, «*mentis aestus*», and, on occasion, as outright prophetic visions.

The most explicitly prophetic of these visions occurred in Würzburg in 1631, at the height of the Thirty Years' War. Kircher, at the time a professor at the local Jesuit College, roused the whole house one night with the terrified report that their whole courtyard was filling with Swedish troops. His confreres looked into the empty courtyard and thought him crazy – until the following week, when the Swedish army took Würzburg and lodged its troops in the Jesuit College just as he had seen them.<sup>1</sup> By then, however, Athanasius Kircher had left Würzburg and the Swedes behind. He, at least, had taken his own vision seriously.

Kircher also saw God's hand in his everyday activity. In one of his earliest published works, the *Prodromus Coptus* of 1636, he declared «I sing inwardly, for myself and the Muses», in effect describing this scholarly book on ancient languages, written in utilitarian prose, as

<sup>1</sup> A. KIRCHER, *Vita admodum Reverendi Patris Athanasii Kircheri*, in HIERONYMUS LANGE-MANTEL, ed., *Fasciculus epistolarum adm. R. P. Athanasii Kircheri Soc. Iesu*, Augsburg, 1684, pp. 39–40.

its own form of poetry.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, despite his own tendencies toward ecstatic mysticism, Kircher always insisted that empirical observation and experiment were excellent ways to discover and understand God. As a Jesuit priest, therefore, he acted both as prophet and as natural philosopher, a writer who, from the beginning of his long career, insisted that scholarship was could be as inspired as verse. This profound belief that learning was its own form of divine possession led Kircher to dislike – and to disbelieve in – miracles. Nature's own laws, to his mind, were wondrous enough.

The lines of Kircher's research throughout his long life were essentially twofold: the antiquities of Egypt and the phenomena of the natural world. To each subject he devoted immense folio volumes, dense with illustrations, and from the beginning of his career, he seems to have worked on both large projects simultaneously. In a pattern that would characterize the rest of his career, he dedicated his first three works to three different subjects: a little treatise on magnetism, *Ars Magnesia* (1631), a treatise on optics, *Primitiae gnomonicae catoptricae* (1635) and the *Prodromus Coptus*, in which he contended (rightly) that Coptic, the liturgical language of Egyptian Christians, provided the crucial clue to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphs. He did not see much difference himself between his antiquarian studies and his studies of the physical world; understanding the laws of Nature, like prayer and contemplation, led to the knowledge of God, who governed the phenomenal world with laws as immutable as the laws of righteous living. He credited the ancient Egyptians with practical as well as spiritual wisdom, knowing that they had built the Pyramids and managed the floods of the Nile (so, of course, do we). As he declared in 1650:

For among our basic assumptions we maintain that the Egyptians had secret knowledge of the most profound mysteries of divinity and nature; we also maintain that this same wisdom was inscribed by the Egyptians on Obelisks and other monuments. In addition we maintain that many of the Greek philosophers, the forerunners of all of Greek wisdom up to that time, derived their wisdom from stones such as these, so that both the teachings transmitted by the Authors survive, and the stones of the Obelisks themselves, immune from every injury of time up until this day, in the splendor of their hieroglyphs, conspicuous after so many centuries, and admirable, because they contain the teachings that have been passed down secretly in the hidden wrappings of various symbols.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. KIRCHER, *Prodromus Coptus*, Roma, Collegium de Propaganda Fide, 1636, p. 36: «Intus cano mihi et musis».

<sup>2</sup> IDEM, *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, Roma, Vitale Mascardi, 1650, p. b 22v: «Habemus itaque

Kircher regarded the secret lore of the Egyptians more as a puzzle to be solved than as an unfathomable mystery, although he couched his decipherments of hieroglyphic inscriptions in suitably mystical terms for his reading public:

We shall restore to wholeness the mystic body of Osiris, dismembered by that Typhon, the injury of Time. Which we shall undertake to do with the grace of GOD assisting, and by the light of the Father (without whose inspiration every effort of human wit is futile).<sup>1</sup>

Anyone who could implicitly describe himself as the new Isis (for it was this Egyptian goddess who recomposed the body of her slain husband Osiris) was obviously more than a scholar – he was an astute self-promoter. Indeed, Kircher regularly punctuated his treatises with heroic accounts of his own enterprise, transforming himself into a figurative Isis, or, in the four monumental volumes of his *Egyptian Oedipus*, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, comparing himself with the ancient Greek hero who solved the riddle of the Sphinx (writing as he did several centuries before Sigmund Freud, Kircher could avoid mentioning the other exploits of Oedipus). The preface to his chapter on «Hieroglyphic Alchemy» is typical, not only for the self-characterization as the new Oedipus, but also for the explicit observation that Kircher is treating a topic, alchemy, that is regarded with suspicion by his Order and by the Holy Office:

You will perhaps wonder, Reader, that I should have taken up a subject in this place that is far removed from the limits established by my Order, nor will I lack for some Aristarchus who will skewer me with an Obelisk because I undertake to discuss, in words, an art that to many is odious, full of sophistry, deceptive, counterfeit, and dicey, and to not a few others is the peak of divine and human wisdom, full of the joy of all good things. I am going to play the Oedipus, destined to loose the hidden knots of abstruse matter, and, in my

ex suppositis, Aegyptios reconditam de altissimis divinitatis et naturae mysteriis habuisse scientiam; habemus etiam, hanc eandem scientiam ab Aegyptiis, Obeliscis caeterisque monumentis insculptam fuisse; praeterea habemus plerosque Graeciae philosophos, totiusque adeo sapientiae Graecanae Antesignanos, ex huiusmodi saxi suam derivasse sapientiam; Cum itaque, et doctrina ab Authoribus tradita in hunc usque diem supersit, supersint et ipsa Obeliscorum saxa, ab omni temporum iniuria in hoc usque diem immunia, hieroglyphicorumque splendore, post tot secula conspicua, et admiranda, quae sub abditis variorum symbolorum involucris, doctrinam traditam arcane contineant».

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106: «Mysticum Osiridis corpus a Typhone temporum iniuria dispersum, in integrum restauremus. Quod nos gratia DEI assistente, et Patris luminibus gratia (sine cuius afflatu omnis ingenii humani conatus frustraneus est) nos praestituros confidimus».

own way, bring that [art], couched in various hieroglyphic wrappings according to the Egyptian mind, out of darkness.<sup>1</sup>

His stated purpose in treating alchemy, then, is anything but mystical; rather, «by faithful and sincere exposition I will bring [the art of alchemy] to light, leaving to each individual full freedom to hold, believe, and judge as he pleases».<sup>2</sup> What follows is essentially a discussion of ancient Egyptian natural philosophy. Kircher wrote when the line between alchemy and chemistry had not been drawn definitively for his own contemporaries; a modern book on ancient Egypt would probably change the title of Kircher's chapter from «Hieroglyphic Alchemy» to «Egyptian Science». Kircher himself understands the difference and defines alchemy strictly as the attempt to transmute base metals into gold («Alchemy...is nothing else but the art of making gold»), thus separating this ancient discipline from the broader investigations of matter that would become the modern science of chemistry.<sup>3</sup> But Kircher's own delight in sensationalism (and his awareness of sensationalism's persuasive powers in the marketplace) competed with his taste for sound experimentation; he could not resist his references to mystic knots and Oedipus, and the ancient riddles that only a modern Oedipus could solve. Thus «Hieroglyphic Alchemy» is a good example of Kircher's *modus operandi* in most of his forty-odd books, a mixture of antiquarianism, natural philosophy, high rhetoric, and finally, the point of all his work, hymns of praise for the God who has created it all.

Despite the fact that only a sophisticated technology could have erected the pyramids and inscribed the resistant surface of the Aswan granite of the obelisks, Athanasius Kircher never suggested that ancient Egypt had anticipated every invention of his own time. Ancient wisdom could not, for example, have anticipated the revelations of telescope and microscope; those were innovations of the modern era.

<sup>1</sup> A. KIRCHER, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, Roma, Mascardi, 1652-1655, vol. II, p. 388: «Mirabitur forsán Lector, argumentum me hoc loco longé extra instituti mei límites semotum suscepisse; neque deerit forsán Aristarchus nonnemo, qui me Obelisco figat, dum multis odiosam, sophisticam, fallacem, fumivendulam, verbo, plenam aleae artem, non paucis divinae, et humanae sapientiae apicem, omnium bonorum felicitate refertam, pertractandam aggredior. Oedipum acturus, cuius proprium est, occultos abstrusarum rerum nodos solvere, hanc pro modulo meo, ad Aegyptiorum mentem variis hieroglyphicorum involucris exhibitam e suis tenebris evolverem».

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*: «fidelí et sincera expositione in lucem educerem; unicuique libertatem plenam relinquens, ut quod voluerit, teneat, credat, iudicet».

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 389: «Alchimia [...] nihil aliud est, quam ars conficiendi aurum».

Kircher believed implicitly in the power of experimentation to reveal truth, and anticipated that his contemporaries would supplement the ancient truths with modern ones. The Egyptians, and after them the Greeks and the Arabs, might have grasped basic ideas about nature, but they had not subjected those ideas to the same kind of quantitative study and experimentation that distinguished seventeenth-century natural philosophy from preceding kinds of study. Thus, he declared, the Egyptians had understood the idea of a universal fertilizing power in the universe, and symbolized that power by the scarab beetle rolling his ball of dung:<sup>1</sup>

The figure of a scarab with spread wings is taken from the primeval school of Egyptian mystagogues, which they called the sun-god...because of the similarity and analogy between the work of this beetle and the work of the sun... For just as the scarab gives life and fertility to his ball while rolling it from East to West by infusing it with seed, so the sun-god, by orbiting the globe, gives it life and fertility by the means of the same fertilizing power (*panspermia rerum*), and fills it with every kind of thing.

For all their wisdom, however, the Egyptians had not taken a helioscope to the sun like his fellow Jesuit Christoph Scheiner, and traced the path of sunspots across its surface (a helioscope worked by projection to protect its user from looking directly at the sun); nor, without the help of the telescope, could they have argued with Kircher's conviction that these spots came about because of disturbances within the sun itself.<sup>2</sup>

I remember my having observed the sun cloaked in this darkness for the first time in the year 1625, on April 4 in Mainz, and later at various other times here

<sup>1</sup> A. KIRCHER, *Ad Illustrissimum et Reverendissimum Josephum Mariam Suaresium, Episcopum Diatribion De Magico Gnosticorum Sigillo*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms Vat. Lat 9064, 84r: «In altera facie sigilli, scarabei figura expansis alis incisa videtur, ex prisca mystarum Aegyptiarum schola extracta; quam solare numen, quod Graeci *heliokantharon* id est ob splendorem scarabeum solis dicebant, ob operum huius insecti ad operum solis similitudinem et analogiam, hoc pacto appellatum. Huiusmodi solare numen Gnostici in suis sigillis nullibi non obviis, veluti simia Aegyptiorum, nunc galli capite, galea clypeaque munitum, nec non serpentibus pedibus formidandum modo sub scarabei figura alata ceu mundi animam, uti in hoc cernitur, exprimebunt. Quemadmodum igitur Heliocantharus globulum suum ab Oriente in occidentem versatum infuso semine ad foecunditatem animat, it hoc solare numen orbem circumeundo e[an]dem rerum panspermia animat, foecundat, et omnigena rerum varietate replet».

<sup>2</sup> A. KIRCHER, *Mundus Subterraneus*, editio secunda, Amsterdam, Jansson, 1678, vol. 1, p. 59: «Hoc amictu deturpatum primo anno 1625 iv Aprilis Moguntiae, et deinde variis aliis temporibus hic Romae cum Scheinero non sine stupore me observasse memini [...]. Haec autem umbrarum lucularumque phaenomena, nulla ratione, extra discum Solarem, sed ex ipsa corporis superficie quasi ebullire, hisce rationibus comprobatur».

in Rome with Scheiner, not without amazement... These phenomena of shadows and flashes are by no means proven [to originate] beyond the Solar disk, but rather to boil up, as it were, from the very surface of its body.

Kircher himself analyzed the sun's fertilizing power along the lines of Paracelsus to conclude that it was made up of salt, sulphur, and mercury – but then, characteristically, explained this Paracelsan triad as a manifestation of the Holy Trinity:<sup>1</sup>

So that a single thing would be seen as established with triple power, in which glorious GOD impressed the sign of his ineffable and adorable Trinity on his primordial creation as a future principle for all things; hence, not without merit, we observe that this Saline-sulphurous-mercurial spirit, like the universal seed of Nature, can be called one substance distinguished in three powers, the proximate cause of all things.

In his encyclopedic scheme, then, the universal principle of fertility, a phenomenon understood at least in its outline by the ancient Egyptians, committed to symbols and inscribed on their obelisks, had been explored with new penetration by the natural philosophers of his time, revealing that Christian faith in a trinitarian God rested on foundations of infinite depth. Modern experimentation only reinforced ancestral faith, as he noted with wonder about the revelations of the microscope:<sup>2</sup>

Who could have believed that vinegar and milk teem with a numberless multitude of worms, unless the Smicroscopic Art had taught us so in these recent times, to the great wonderment of all? Who could ever have been made to think that the green color in citron leaves was composed of every kind of color, unless the Smicroscopic Art had revealed it? All these things experiment, the indomitable mistress of things, teaches us.

Because he held the laws of nature in such high regard, Kircher disliked the idea that they should be disrupted, and that people should prefer that disruption to the intricate machinery of the world running as it should. (Jesus, too, complained unfailingly about people's need to see miracles, as if the miracle of Creation were not enough). Kircher loathed superstition for its simplistic view of the world, and wrote strenuously against it. He launched his little book

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 328-329: «ut una res triplici virtute constituta videatur, in qua gloriosus DEVS primordiali creaturae suae veluti rerum omnium futuro principio, Sacrosanctae ineffabilis et adorandae suae Triadis signaculum impressit: Unde non immerito hoc tanquam semen Naturae universale, Spiritum salino-sulphureo-mercurialem, unam substantiam triplici virtuti distinctum nuncupandum censuimus, proximum verum omnium principium».

<sup>2</sup> A. KIRCHER *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, editio secunda, Amstelodami, 1671, p. 834.

*De Prodigiosis Crucibus* of 1661 against a sudden panic in the city of Naples, where crosses seemed to be appearing miraculously on people's clothing. Kircher demonstrated, through experimentation and illustrations, that the crosses were bits of pumice from Vesuvius, carried on droplets of rain that spread in a crosslike pattern across the weave of linen garments. He noted at the same time, however, that the message in any divine manifestation was the same: repent and lead a better life.<sup>1</sup>

[Portents are] like hieroglyphic symbols swathed in enigmatic and allegorical meanings which the Divine Wisdom records in Heaven, Earth, and the elements as if in a book and sets it before mortals to read; when they withdraw from the paths of Divine Will they are terrified by the threats held out before them, and turn back toward better fruits.

As Abraham said to the rich man in the parable that Jesus recounts in the Gospel of Luke (see the epigraph to this article), there have already been prophets enough pointing the way.

It is this reluctance to acknowledge portents and superstition that led Athanasius Kircher to speak out with equal vehemence during the plague that assailed Rome in 1656, a disaster he ascribed to microbes rather than the wrath of God. Hence, despite the fact that his microscopes were not yet powerful enough to see the bacillus of *Yersinia pestis*, he advocated setting up quarantines to contain the disease. Not surprisingly, perhaps, his friend, Pope Alexander VII, was of similar mind; the documentation for those provisions still survives today in the Vatican Library, and Kircher himself set down the argument in a definitive way in his *Scrutinium pestis* of 1658.<sup>2</sup>

These worms that are the propagators of plague are so tiny, so slender and subtle, that they elude the senses' every power of comprehension: unless they were visible under the most finely tuned *Smicroscopium* you would call them atoms...they move about like atoms when sunlight is projected into a dark corner.

In a sense, then, Kircher saw no difference – certainly, no difference in value – between poetry and scholarship, prophecy and reproducible results; to him, they all showed the guiding hand of God. As Jesus said to the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Gospel of Matthew:

<sup>1</sup> IDEM, *De Prodigiosis Crucibus*, Rome, Mascardi, 1661, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> IDEM, *Scrutinium physico-medicum contagiosae luis, quae pestis dicitur*, Rome, Mascardi, 1658, p. 131. The provisions for plague are illustrated in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Chigi P.VII.13.

When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?<sup>1</sup>

Kircher was not so sure that the hypocrites of his time could discern the face of the sky; that was the great achievement of his era's new wise men. It was the achievement he sought to reconcile with the ancient rules for right living that he discerned among the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Rabbis, and the Church Fathers, so that in his own way he could carry out the Jesuit mission «to comfort souls» in an age when comforts of any kind were tragically few.

<sup>1</sup> MATTHEW 16: 1-3: «The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven. He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?».